

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. **This Sunday is an anniversary of sorts.** A year ago this week all of us absorbed very quickly that life as we knew it was about to change. Tom Hanks and his wife were diagnosed with COVID. The NBA began to cancel games. **The WHO declared a global pandemic.**
1. A year ago I started the week having a series of conversations with our Haven leaders, **how do we make our gatherings more safe?** We ordered individual communion cups and wafers - surely those would be safer than a shared bread and cup. We bought individually wrapped granola bars, thinking those might be safer than our shared bagel station. We stocked up on hand sanitizer and planned to place the chairs the following Sunday a bit further apart.
 2. But as the week went on, hour after hour brought new information and deeper understanding of what was needed. **Yascha Mounk wrote an article in *The Atlantic*, titled "Cancel Everything"**, and within a few days, the consensus quickly became clear that this was indeed what was needed. Offices told their employees to work from home. Schools abruptly announced an immediate move to "distance learning". The school district we rented space from on Sundays abruptly cancelled all of their rental agreements. And our Haven leadership immediately shifted direction, planning an immediate move to Zoom. **I wrote to the community on March 14th, 2020 "I don't know when it will be safe for us to gather again at Washington Elementary, but to be real: it could be awhile."**
 3. So as it turns out, that was a bit of an understatement. **Honestly, I had no idea "awhile" would mean more than a year.** I had no idea we'd still be doing virtual only services not only for Easter 2020, but also for Easter 2021. I had no idea what was coming - that we'd see some of our most familiar faces pull back from the shared Haven space, naming that Zoom church just can't bring the life they need right now (which I get). I had no idea how so many of us would struggle with our mental health in various ways in the weeks, and months to come. I had no idea what it would feel like to console my kids months into lockdown without any idea when they could play on a playground again with a friend or meet their classroom teacher in person. I had no idea how many lives would soon be lost across our country and throughout the globe. I had no idea the ways this virus would play into and deepen our social and political divides; heightening our inequities, further enflaming our racial tensions. I had not idea we'd bear witness to the hopeful rise and all-too-predictable fall of much white support for Black Lives Matter. Or that we'd see a persistent and abhorrent rise throughout the year in violence directed at Asian American and Pacific Islander bodies in cities throughout out country. I had no idea things were about to get so hard. **And maybe it was for the best for all of us that truthfully none of us had any idea what was really coming.**
 4. Of course, as I speak this, it's also true that today, despite the fact that this whole year has felt like so much, that so many of us are grieving losses in different ways, **we also stand in a place that feels cautiously hopeful.** Vaccine rollout has been continuing to move along. The CDC is now saying fully vaccinated people can gather without any of the other virus mitigation strategies we've become so accustomed to. In a few weeks, my two elementary age kids will return to in-person learning. **A return to in-person Haven services feels like it may be coming in the not-impossibly-distant future.** Perhaps we can begin to see the contours of moving from a season of loss to a season of healing and renewal. **But we're not quite there yet.** We're still in the longing. We're still in the waiting. We're still in the uncertainty. We've yet to return from the exile. And even once we begin to

emerge and reconnect in person, I think we'll have a season to go of assessing the damage. The storm has to pass before you can really account for all that it has wrought. There will be a time of beginning to come together and absorb all that has happened while we've been distanced from one another. This is a limbo season, where we're still looking to be sustained in the midst of this challenging leg of our collective journey, just as we will need to be sustained through whatever comes next.

B. As I think you all know at this point, **we're several weeks into a series of conversations we've called the "Stories That Sustain Us"**. In this series we've been looking to the gospels, the stories in the New Testament of the life of Jesus, and we've been considering what they might bring us that can be nourishing and sustaining to us on this covid journey. Now, truthfully, I had an idea for a story I intended to look at today, but as I spent time preparing this week, I found myself instead returning to a story I preached on a couple of years ago. I found myself considering another season in which I found myself navigating my own delicate limbo between loss and hope - walking that fragile sensitive space as I accompanied two of the women I'm closest to in the world through diagnoses and treatment of serious cancers. Now I'm happy to say now that a week ago my sister Mandy turned 40. But when she was diagnosed with stage 4 metastatic breast cancer at age 38, it was not clear we'd ever celebrate that milestone of another decade of life. In that limbo season I was in, there was a story that spoke to me. And as we mark a strange anniversary this week and navigate our own limbo with all the uncertainty of what's to come, I wondered if this story and some of the teaching I've shared around it might not be helpful to revisit. So if you were here a couple of years ago, some of what I share this morning might be familiar. Today we're gonna look at a story about Jesus' response in one of those limbo moments. It's the story of what happens after the death of Jesus' friend Lazarus.

II. The Lazarus Story

A. First, a little background. **The Lazarus story is a unique story that we find only in the gospel of John.** You likely know the basic premise: by many accounts Jesus' most spectacular miracle is that he raises Lazarus from the dead. **If you've heard the name Lazarus at all, you probably know where the story I'm talking about is going.** And lest we think performing a resurrection is just something Jesus does in the spur of the moment as the spirit moves, the way John seems to tell the story, Jesus knows as Lazarus is dying that he is going to raise him from the dead. That's days before he does it.

1. So **there's the set up** that foreshadows the end of the story, in which Jesus indicated that a huge miracle is gonna happen. And **there's the miracle itself**, which many believe is the climax of John's argument that Jesus is indeed GOD-IN-THE-FLESH. The way John tells the story this huge Lazarus miracle is the straw that breaks the camels back. It's the one that catalyzes his enemies. For John, Lazarus' resurrection is the match that lights the fuse leading to Jesus' unjust death.

2. But **today, I'm not so interested in those parts of the story**: neither the set-up, nor the miraculous conclusion, nor even the consequence of that miracle. Don't get me wrong: those all matter. But the miracle of resurrection is not the only story John 11 tells. While many are fascinated in this story by the parts which reveal the unique God-nature of Jesus, the one who can raise the dead, today I am interested in the parts that reveal his vulnerable human side, and what it means to us in our vulnerability. Because that to me, is good news, too.

3. So let's read that part of the story, when Jesus arrives in Bethany.

B. 17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had been in the tomb four days already. 18 (Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 so many of the Jewish

people of the region had come to Martha and Mary to console them over the loss of their brother.) 20 So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary was sitting in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will grant you.”

23 Jesus replied, “Your brother will come back to life again.”

24 Martha said, “I know that he will come back to life again in the resurrection at the last day.” 25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even if he dies, 26 and the one who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” 27 She replied, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God who comes into the world.”

28 And when she had said this, Martha went and called her sister Mary, saying privately, “The Teacher is here and is asking for you.” 29 So when Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. 30 (Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still in the place where Martha had come out to meet him.) 31 Then the people who were with Mary in the house consoling her saw her get up quickly and go out. They followed her, because they thought she was going to the tomb to weep there.

32 Now when Mary came to the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the people who had come with her weeping, he was intensely moved in spirit and greatly distressed. 34 He asked, “Where have you laid him?” They replied, “Lord, come and see.” 35 Jesus wept. 36 Thus the people who had come to mourn said, “Look how much he loved him!” 37 But some of them said, “This is the man who caused the blind man to see! Couldn’t he have done something to keep Lazarus from dying?”

38 Jesus, intensely moved again, came to the tomb.

1. So between the setup and the miracle, this is the story we have: **Jesus encountering two grieving women** in the wake of losing their brother, someone he cares about deeply. From elsewhere in the gospels, as well as in this story, we get a sense of how close Jesus was both to Lazarus and his sisters. You may remember the story of **Jesus dining in their home where Martha, the busy hostess, admonished her sister for sitting at the rabbi's feet** pondering his teaching rather than serving him dinner. Jesus is more than a spiritual leader who floats in with some words of encouragement. Yes, he is their rabbi, but he is more. He’s a close friend, a loved one. Earlier in the story, the sisters reached out to him with the words, “**Lord, the one you love is sick.**” But Jesus didn’t rush there, he waited. And now that he has finally arrived at this intimate place of grief, **each has a response for him that names the depth of their pain.**
2. Martha says it first: “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*” Mary shares the same lament when she finds him, “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*” The others who’ve come to grieve with and comfort the sisters, have their own version, “*Couldn’t he have done something to keep Lazarus from dying?*”

- a) **These are the statements of the forsaken. The questions of the hopeless.** They come from the place we go when we are so heartbroken and bewildered by life's turn of events that we grasp at some way to understand, some cause that could have changed our circumstances, some person to blame that which feels so beyond our control.
 - (1) "If we hadn't had so much financial stress, our marriage could have survived."
 - (2) "If only I had gone to the doctor sooner, this pregnancy might have survived."
 - (3) "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."
 - b) Jesus arrives to a persistent question that everyone seems to be asking. Why didn't he come sooner? Why didn't he stop this from happening? **Where was he?**
 - (1) Now let's just name, no matter who you are, that's a hard spot to walk into. I have to admit, I am not as mature as Jesus. I'm an enneagram 3 which in part means I care a lot about people thinking I'm doing things well. If I sense people are blaming me for something going wrong, particularly something high stakes and emotional, I tend to get defensive. But **Jesus doesn't respond with defensiveness.** He doesn't deflect their hurt or justify his behavior. He responds not with self-protection but with genuine love in the midst of pain. So what does that look like?
3. The first important thing I notice is this: **Jesus doesn't prescribe a process for the women's pain.** Rather, he responds to each person's grief in a unique way, following their lead.
- a) Martha and Mary both start with the same statement, the "Lord, if you had been here..." cry. But they take it in different directions, and Jesus follows the lead of the person he's with.
 - b) **Martha wants to have a conversation about hope, and Jesus meets her there.** For her, she follows the "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." with, "But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will grant you."
 - (1) Now I don't think she's saying this because she's expecting him to raise her brother from the dead. It seems clear later in the story she assumed that's not possible. No I think she's naming that **she is heartbroken that her brother has died, but that fact doesn't undo what she, her sister, and her brother have all come to be passionate about, participating in the in-breaking of God's benevolent way that Jesus seems to be bringing.** Even if she grieves that Jesus couldn't or wouldn't stop this scenario from playing out the way it did, it hasn't shaken her conviction that he is the *sent one*, the one who moves with the authority of the Divine. She still believes Jesus is connected to something beyond and that is a source of hope, even in the face of grief. She needs that. She's reaching out to Jesus pleading for assurance that her hope is not misplaced.
 - (2) And Jesus meets her. He encourages her with his own hopeful words, rooted in faith. "Your brother will come back to life again."
 - (3) Martha assumes he's talking about a life beyond in the future, but Jesus seems to correct her. He calls her to trust that in his very self, right now is life that can endure, resurrection that somehow breaks through, even death. Life in the midst of loss that is available to all who put their trust in him. He uses a word in speaking to her called *pisteuo*. It is often translated "believe" (which makes us think it's cerebral) but **it also means to trust**, as in, to actively trust in or entrust one's self to. Jesus is meeting Martha's questions with assurance that she can trust him, and that that trust has meaning.

- (a) ***“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who trusts in me will live even if he dies, and the one who lives and trusts in me will never die. Do you trust this?”***
- (b) Yes, Martha responds. And then she gives a pure declaration of faith in who Jesus is, even in the wake of disappointment. Even in the midst of grief. ***“I trust that you are the Christ, the Son of God who comes into the world.”*** Even when all is lost, even when nothing makes sense, even when I’m so disappointed, I trust you are the Messiah.
- (4) In the wake of loss, in the unresolved questions, in the bewilderment of heartbreak, Martha is looking for hope beyond her present circumstances. Jesus is there to gently meet her in that place.
- c) But as we’ve seen in other stories, **Martha and Mary are not the same.** Mary does not eagerly rush out to meet Jesus, seeking spiritual solace. She is deep in her feelings. When her sister tells her the rabbi waits for her, she approaches and falls in a pool of tears at his feet. Mary’s always at Jesus’ feet. Learning torah. Soon she’ll be anointing these same feet with perfume and her hair. Here she wails at his feet. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Period. No “but”. **There’s no declaration of faith.** Only disappointment and heartbreak. **Mary is in the place of raw desolation and Jesus doesn’t try to talk her out of it.**
- d) **Miriam Greenspan is a psychotherapist and author of a book called *Healing Through the Dark Emotions*.** In it she shares part of her story, how ten years into her vocation, she lost her first child, a baby boy named Aaron who died two months after he had been born. His whole life had been lived in the hospital. Dr. Greenspan was overwhelmed with unbearable grief, understandably. But she also noticed how uncomfortable others felt around her grief when it stretched from weeks to months. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV*, which is sometimes called the “psychiatrists Bible”, patients grieving the death of a loved one are permitted two months to exhibit symptoms like sadness, insomnia and loss of appetite. If their grief persists beyond that, they may be diagnosed with depression and treated with prescription medication. As Greenspan writes, ***“Grief, perhaps the most inevitable of all human emotions, given the unalterable fact of mortality, is seen as an illness if it goes on too long.”***
- e) How many of us have felt this tension between our own feelings and what others expect us to feel? How many of us have seen this at play the year, as we have all navigated a similar set of circumstances but in very different ways? Our pain points have been different. What we need in our places of loss has been different. And in this story Jesus seems to validate those differences. When Jesus encounters Mary at the tomb, he doesn’t prescribe her medication or preach a sermon she’s not looking for right now. Because Jesus doesn’t prescribe a process for our pain. He lets her words of heartbreak and betrayal stand without dispute.
4. **But Jesus does more than stand as witness to Mary’s pain.** He does something else that is also important. **He allows himself to feel Mary’s pain. He enters into the helplessness of human vulnerability.**
- a) Yes, Jesus knows what’s coming. He knows this moment of loss is not the last moment. He knows there’s something around the corner, in this case, very close around the corner. But that doesn’t stop him from inhabiting this moment of pure grief fully.

- (1) In the wake of Mary's emotional display, Jesus himself shows two strong emotions, emotions that are unique for him.
- (2) First, there is an indignant anger. The word in Greek is "*enebrimesato*". We see it twice in this little passage, in verse 33 and verse 38. Our translation says he was "intensely moved" but it doesn't give the full thrust of this feeling. The word generally refers to outrage, to anger, literally to an anger that makes you snort with fury. It's a strong, strong feeling.
- (3) And then when he approaches the tomb itself, and sees the evidence of death with his own eyes, he weeps. He joins those who have been shedding tears for days. He joins Mary who is wailing at his feet. He is overcome with grief too, and he weeps.
- (4) I read a number of scholars this week who say this can't be about Jesus feeling sad or mad about Lazarus' death because he knows he's going to raise him. He must be mad at the devil, they say, and sad that the devil seems to have won here.
 - (a) But personally, **I can't help but wonder if that is simply the musing of straight cis white male theologians who perhaps do not see the value in emotional experience.** Perhaps they do not see the value or truly understand the power of entering into another's emotional landscape, feeling *with* them. Perhaps they don't get how transformative that is for our hearts. How meaningful it is to receive.
 - (b) **Wes Moore is an author and activist.** I recently heard him interviewed in a podcast where he described the difference between sympathetic love and empathetic love in a way I found so helpful, and it illuminates what I think Jesus is about here. "*Sympathetic love*" he said, "*is a love where you're basically saying, 'Well I'm doing this because I feel bad for you.'* An empathetic love is, '*I do this because your pain is also mine.*'"
- (5) This, empathetic love is not an easy love. It's a costly love, costlier than sympathetic love. **Empathetic love is a love that hurts.** But that choice to ***hurt with*** has power. This is the choice I think Jesus is making at the tomb. Jesus is led by Mary into the desolation of human vulnerability. Into the tragedy of it. Into the grief of no consolation. And he is willing to sit in the dark with her. He allows himself to feel the dark of desolation. He weeps. He snorts with anger at the injustice of it all. He encounters the loss. He loves with real empathy.
- (6) **I was on a personal retreat, spending two days and a night at a Catholic retreat center in the South Bay with Ginny Prince the day I got the confirmation call from my sister that her biopsies had all come back positive for malignant breast cancer.** While I had no way of knowing when we booked the trip weeks in advance what the day would be like, the fortuitous timing of the trip felt like a gift of grace. I was in a space and time set apart for contemplation, prayer, and connection with God, alongside a dear friend who was open to bearing witness and holding space with me for whatever the time needed to be. In that space I could not skip forward to celebrating my sister's 40th birthday 18 months later. I was in the shock. I was in the fear. I was in the grief of being reminded in a personal, painful way how little control over my life or the lives of those I love I really have.
- (7) **In moments like those, I find more comfort in a God that weeps, in a God that snorts with us at the heaviness of it all, at a God who is broken open, then a God who is invulnerable, a God who is above and beyond it all.** Yes, I long for resurrection. Yes, I long for miracles. Yes, I am actively trying to live a life trusting in

the one who calls himself resurrection and life, but in the moments before the resurrection, in the moments when the world is closing in and it is hard to see beyond this here and now to some brighter day, **I need to know that God's heart heaves with mine. I need to weep and not be rushed. I need the empathy of a God who is able to be vulnerable with me.**

(8) I believe **all of us need this kind of empathetic love.** And if we are to be the embodiment of God's in breaking in the world as Jesus was, if we are to be anointed by the same spirit that was in him, and commissioned to be the Body of Christ here today, **all of us are called to come forward for one another with that same willingness to be vulnerable together.** All of us are invited to be present to each other, the way Ginny was present to me at that sacred retreat, showing me the empathetic love of God as we wept together. This is a call for all of us as we journey through the limbo together; as we rediscover each other after more than a year of separation. **Can we care for each other the same way Jesus cared for those sisters? Can we receive one another's care?**

b) At the end of our passage you see that second snort of anger from Jesus. He snorts as he walks to the tomb. *If we kept reading, we'd see him perform an amazing miracle. It's a great story. I encourage you to go home and read it.* But today I just want to end our study of this passage by pointing out that it's Jesus's snorting anger that compels his action in the story. He doesn't come in as a sympathetic savior and just slap a happy ending on the story. His miraculous action is catalyzed by his empathetic love. Jesus' heart heaves with us. And that heave has the power to bring deliverance. **God's vulnerable empathy changes things.** May we too be moved in the same way. And may that movement bring us from feeling to acting, and in so doing, may we all participate in building the new life after loss we all long for. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. Think of some of the emotions you've felt over the last year. If Jesus was feeling with you this year, what do you think he'd feel?
2. Where do you feel challenged to move from sympathy to greater empathy in relationships in your life? Who are you open to receiving empathetic care from?